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AFTER AFGHANISTAN:

TWO OPPOSING VIEWS ON THE SOVIET MILITARY

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CENTER FOR NAVAL ANALYSES

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Introduction

When Gen. Sec. Mikhail Gorbachev announced in 1987 his new defensive doctrine of "reasonable sufficiency," debate in Soviet society on the role of the military came to the forefront. The assumption that had existed since Stalin's day—that the Soviet military was the foundation and strength of the Soviet social system—began to be challenged openly. The debate moved from military journals read primarily by officers, to the pages of serious civilian journals and even mass-circulation daily newspapers.

By 1988, when Gorbachev declared that the Soviet Union would unilaterally reduce the number of troops in Eastern Europe by 500,000, the debate on the Soviet military had intensified. Debates focused on the size of the military, whether or not there should be a professional military, what the army's mission should be, what privileges the army should enjoy, and so forth. These discussions continue with great energy and emotion.

On one side of the debate, there are military reformers represented by groups such as young military officers, liberal deputies in the Congress of People's Deputies, enthusiastic supporters of *perestroika* in Soviet think tanks (known as *instituchiki*), angry Soviet veterans of the Afghan war, and nationalistic-minded citizens of secessionist-inclined republics. In general, they believe the military is too large, too expensive, and more concerned about protecting its privileged status than defending the country.

On the opposite side of the debate are enthusiastic supporters of the military, represented by conservative deputies; World War II veterans; older, professional officers; and "national bolsheviks."[1] This group has watched the reduction of the military with dismay, feeling that a sacred institution

has been insulted. Military supporters worry that a weakened army will be unable to restore order in a time of increasing chaos.

As the Soviet Union falls into disarray, the question of the relationship between the military and the civil populace increases in importance. Two well known writers on the Soviet military, Aleksandr Prokhanov and Artyem Borovik, hold opposing views on the value of the Soviet military today. A comparison of their positions can aid in understanding two diametrically opposed individuals who are molding Soviet public opinion of the military.

Artyem Borovik is the Editor of the Moscow publication, *Sovershenо Sekretno*. Formerly, he was a Foreign Editor of the Soviet weekly, *Ogonyek*, a liberal magazine known for challenging government policies. As a journalist, his coverage of the war in Afghanistan gave Soviet readers the first critical view of Soviet conduct during the war.

Aleksandr Prokhanov is the Editor of the Soviet monthly, *Sovetskaya Literatura*. From 1960 to 1972, he worked primarily as an engineer and radar operator, and occasionally worked for Soviet military intelligence (GRU). He has been an editor of several publications, including *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. As a freelance writer from 1972 to 1988, he has published over 30 essays, articles, and books, many of which were based on his personal observations of Soviet political-military activities in Afghanistan, Angola, Mozambique, and Nicaragua. Prokhanov continues to write essays defending the military from liberal attacks. His writings have earned him the sobriquet of "the nightingale of the General Staff."[2]

While both writers do not address all issues concerning Soviet military doctrine or structure, Borovik and Prokhanov are good examples of the current thinking of each side. This paper discusses principal areas of disagreement between them: (1) the decision-making behind the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; (2) the impact of the Afghan war and Soviet attitudes toward their Afghan veterans; (3) the current status of the Soviet military; and (4) the future role of the Soviet military.

The Decision To Invade Afghanistan

Both Prokhanov and Borovik have used the subject of the Soviet army's experience in Afghanistan as a vehicle to put forth their respective views on the Soviet military. Although they both view the invasion as a mistake, they disagree on the context in which the decision was made.[3]

Prokhanov believes that the military was forced into the intervention by the civilian leadership.[4] Although he feels that some General Staff officers at the time wanted to stem the expansion of Shiite fundamentalism, he argues that the decision was made by senior Kremlin officials, who were influenced in part by "pro-American" and "pro-Israeli" groups in Soviet institutes who wanted to embroil Moscow in a conflict with the Islamic world.[5]

In an opposing view, Borovik feels that although Gen. Sec. Leonid Brezhnev was ultimately responsible for the invasion, the military had contributed to the decision to do so. He cites inconsistencies in the military's denial of responsibility, such as the contradictions between the recollections of Gen. V. I. Varennikov (now Commander-in-Chief of Soviet Ground Forces) and statements made by the former Soviet-installed president of Afghanistan, Babrak Karmal. Borovik even quotes a "high-ranking" foreign ministry functionary who stated that Afghanistan was seen as an attractive laboratory for testing the military's strength.[6]

Treatment of the Returning Veterans

It is striking how differently the two writers interpret how the Afghanistan experience affected the Soviet army and the country as a whole. In their writings, however, it is clear that both authors are sympathetic toward the average soldier and the military leadership in the field during and after the war in Afghanistan. Prokhanov's essays during the 1980s and, in 1987, Borovik's well-known, three-part series in *Ogonyek* recount the bravery and sacrifice of Soviet infantrymen and their return to an unsympathetic, even hostile society. (This is not too different from

the observations made by American journalists during and after America's experience in Vietnam.) Both writers believe that the Soviet General Staff and the commanders in the field had a better grasp of the situation in Afghanistan than did any other group of Soviet elites (e.g., diplomats or resident KGB staff) operating in the country.[7]

In 1988, toward the end of the war, Prokhanov wrote, "The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan is a courageous decision.... The army is in excellent combat form: morale is high among soldiers and officers. The withdrawal is no defeat."[8] Prokhanov later criticized Soviet society for turning its back on the army, and on the returning Afghan veterans in particular. He wrote:

> The fate of the Afghan contingent is developing in an especially dramatic way. This invaluable catalyst in the army, which possesses real combat experience and which has demonstrated its ability to fight and to shed blood for the state, this last contingent of "civil servants," which perished on behalf of the state idea in the ravines and deserts of Asia—that contingent, upon returning to the Motherland, was rejected by the state.[9]

Unlike Prokhanov, Borovik does not see any positive aspects, such as combat experience or heroism, of the war. Instead, he holds the war experience partially responsible for the ills that have gripped the Soviet Union in the latter half of the 1980s. His grim reflection reads:

> ...we rarely stopped to think how Afghanistan would influence us—despite the hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers and officers and the scores of diplomats, journalists, scholars, and military and political advisers who passed through it.... It is relatively easy, however, to assess Afghanistan's effects on the Soviet people who worked and fought there. With a mere wave of

> Brezhnev's elderly hand, they were thrown into a country where bribery, corruption, profiteering, and drugs were no less common than the long lines in Soviet stores. These diseases can be far more infectious and dangerous than hepatitis, particularly when they reach epidemic proportions.[10]

Current Status of the Soviet Military

Prokhanov and Borovik hold opposite views regarding the present-day Soviet military establishment. For Prokhanov, the Afghan War, even if a policy error, served to strengthen the army, which for him remains a pillar of Soviet society. But for Borovik, the experience led to needless death and destruction and is one of the causes of the present Soviet economic and social decay.

Borovik's perspective is shared by many of the "new thinkers," such as Georgi and Alexei Arbatov, the late Andrei Sakharov, and Andrei Kortunov. Like them, he supports the following positions: (1) an all-volunteer military at significantly reduced levels; (2) greater civilian control of the military; (3) thorough oversight by the Supreme Soviet; and (4) greater openness on the part of the military (for example, an accurate accounting of the Soviet defense budget).

Borovik is a strong supporter of the new Soviet defensive doctrine of "reasonable sufficiency."[11] It can be said that Borovik's view is similar to Gorbachev's apparent conviction that military reform is necessary.[12] For many on the Soviet General staff, however, the subject of military reform is unpopular. Aleksandr Prokhanov is one of the most articulate critics of liberal reform. In striking contrast to Borovik's perspective, Prokhanov lashes out at critics of the military:

> The army is being blamed for ruining the national economy. All kinds of assertions are being made—the

> defense industry, like a vampire, sucked the vital juices of the industry, emptied the store shelves, and bled the national economy white. Pacifist-minded economists began the unprecedentedly large excision from the military complex of entire production entities.... Only a few months' time was needed to chase our military formations out of the East European countries. Buffer zones were destroyed, parity was smashed, and borders caved in, and we, in our opposition, were thrown back to prewar times.[13]

Prokhanov has repeatedly held liberal leaders and those in the press responsible for destroying Soviet superpower status and lowering the prestige of the Soviet military in the eyes of the Soviet public.

Future Role of the Soviet Military

The relevant question then is how these two writers view the future role of the Soviet military in a new, emerging "Russia" or a new resulting union. Borovik and Prokhanov agree that the Soviet Union in its present form will not last. Both envision either an independent Russia or a confederation encompassing the three Slavic republics of Russia, the Ukraine, and Byelorussia.[14]

Borovik does not view the military as a major catalyst of this transformation. He discounts the possibility of a military coup, believing that the military would not want to take responsibility for the deteriorating economic conditions. He is unsure as to future military reforms, pointing out that crucial decisions regarding what form the new nation will take need to be made first. Borovik is certain that, at the very least, there will be a smaller military-industrial complex.[15]

Prokhanov believes that, as economic collapse causes greater disarray, the military's role in the "new order" will expand. But, before that is to take place,

he paints a very bleak picture as he sees reformist forces causing the breakdown of internal military control:

> Propaganda is being used to sow mass anti-army psychosis. Already the soldiers in the units are poorly controlled, are ready to desert, and are refusing to carry out orders.[16]

Given his close ties to the General Staff, Prokhanov may reflect the very real angst of the Soviet military leadership in using the army to play a role in restoring order:

> The constant involvement of the army in national conflicts, with the subsequent settling of the psychological and legal score, is one of the most sophisticated and immoral means of suppressing the army. The troops have been given the labels of "executioners" and "marauders" and are already practically paralyzed. They are refusing to execute orders issued by the generals and officers. It is no wonder that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the command element to push the army into the gaping inter-ethnic holes and wounds. The army is refusing to trust its command element or the country's political leadership.[17]

Like Borovik, Prokhanov insists that the military does not intend to try ousting Gorbachev. His comments suggest that given present circumstances, the military may lack the requisite control of their own troops in order to conduct a successful coup.

Nevertheless, whereas Borovik perceives the military and the political leadership that controlled it as having made many mistakes in the past and becoming smaller while divesting itself of unneeded military equipment,[18] Prokhanov believes he is witnessing the destruction of the "last bastion of centralism, the last haven of national character" as the Soviet Union reduces its military.[19]

Conclusion

To the Western eye, Prokhanov's comments may seem reactionary and hysterical, while those of Borovik appear reasonable. It can be argued that both perspectives are rational. Borovik views the military as expensive and a burden to the failing economy in a world that lacks any serious threat to the Soviet Union. In contrast, Prokhanov is concerned about a Soviet military weakened and vilified and therefore unable to restore internal order or to deal with unforseen external threats in the next century. He fears "the situation of an army on strike...becoming a reality."[20]

The significance of these very different perspectives should not be underestimated because both writers represent competing opinions that the Soviet leadership is presently trying to contend with. For most of 1990, it appeared that reformers, such as Borovik, had the upper hand, as evidenced by continued decrease of conventional capabilities and the cooperative international nature of Soviet actions. In the wake of such events as KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov's recent Cold War-like statements about the West and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation, however, it is questionable whether this reform will continue in the face of accelerating political and economic deterioration.

Gorbachev is in a nearly impossible situation. Should he shun the concerns of the General Staff, he would be rebuffing the key institution that might be able to keep him in power and the Soviet Union intact. If he sides with the military leadership, agrees to institute reform on their terms, and through dictatorial means depends on them to restore and maintain order, he will almost surely guarantee continuing economic decline, especially in the long term. There are few instances in history where authoritarian rule and central planning have brought about the economic reform needed for long-term prosperity.

Yet the evidence suggests that Gorbachev is siding with the military. The new draft statement of military doctrine, which presumably has the blessing of the Defense Council chaired by Gorbachev, contains anti-reformist language that gives the Soviet Union the enormously expensive option to fight a large, protracted, conventional war.[21] Furthermore, in January 1991, Gorbachev dispatched (or at least consented to the order to dispatch) paratroopers to the Baltic republics in an attempt to enforce central rule, a function normally carried out by the Interior Ministry. At the time of writing this paper, it is unclear whether this is a tactical maneuver Gorbachev is well known for or a significant change in his approach to leadership. A clear indicator of his intent will be the extent to which force is used in the coming months to bring about Gorbachev's desired political ends.

1. A term originally used to describe a group of Russians in the 1920s who supported the Communists not out of any enthusiasm for socialism, but out of a belief that the Communists had the capability to make Russia strong and thereby keep the empire intact.

2. Aaron Trehub, "Soviet Press Coverage of the War in Afghanistan: From Cheerleading to Disenchantment," *Report on the USSR*, Vol. 1, No. 10, March 10, 1989, p. 3. Trehub credits Soviet literary critic A. Latynina for coining this title.

3. This observation is drawn from a comparison of papers submitted by Borovik and Prokhanov for the 1990 Sea Power Forum, "Recent Conflicts and the Current Crisis," sponsored by the Center for Naval Analyses, September 25-26, 1990. (Aleksandr Prokhanov, "My War" and Artyem Borovik, "Afghanistan: Two Years After the War.")

4. Trehub, "Soviet Press Coverage of the War in Afghanistan: From Cheerleading to Disenchantment," details how, in the early 1980s, Prokhanov was very enthusiastic in his support for the war. Around 1987, he became less supportive of the war, but very defensive of the army as an important institution. Also, see Jeanette Voas,"Preventing Future Afghanistans: Reform in Soviet Policymaking on Military Intervention Abroad," CNA Occasional Paper, August 1990.

5. Prokhanov, "My War," p. 12.

6. Borovik, "Afghanistan: Two Years After the War," pp. 3-9.

7. Borovik and Prokhanov, comments made at the Center for Naval Analyses 1990 Sea Power Forum, September 25-26, 1990.

8. Prokhanov, "Ending the 'Afghan Campaign,'" *World Press Review*, May 1988, p. 39.

9. Prokhanov, "Kto zashchitit zashchitnikov?" ("Who will defend the defenders?") *Sovetskii voin*, No. 12, June 1990, p. 3. Also, a similar article of his appears in *Nash Sovermennik*, No. 5, May 1990, pp. 85-98, as translated in JPRS-UPA-90-008-L, pp. 25-34.

10. Borovik, "Afghanistan: Two Years After the War," pp. 9-10.

11. Borovik made these comments to the author in a conversation in Moscow, August 1990. What particularly impressed him was his experience spending several weeks with U.S. soldiers at Ft. Benning, Georgia, a year earlier. Borovik was surprised by the proficiency and morale of volunteer soldiers.

12. See M. Gorbachev, "Dostoino proiti pereval v istorii strany," ("To honorably cross a crucial point in the country's history"), *Pravda*, August 19, 1990, p. 1. This was a reprint of Gorbachev's speech to the officers of the Odessa Military District on August 17, in which he touched on many issues of military reform.

13. Prokhanov, "Kto zashcitit zashchitnikov?", p. 2.

14. Comments by both writers at the 1990 Sea Power Forum, September 25-26, 1990.

15. Conversation with Borovik by author, Moscow, August 1990.

16. Prokhanov, "Kto zashchitit zashchitnikov?", p. 2.

17. Ibid.

18. Borovik, comments made at the 1990 Sea Power Forum, September 25-26, 1990.

19. Prokhanov, "Kto zashchitit zashchitnikov?", p. 2.

20. Ibid, p. 33.

21. "O voyenoi doktrine SSSR," ("On military doctrine of the USSR"), *Voyennaya Mysl'*, special edition, 1990, pp. 25-26. The text reads that conventional war "may" lead to nuclear war as opposed to "will inevitably" lead to a nuclear exchange. This is a significant doctrinal difference between the General Staff and reformers. Reformers want the less expensive option to depend exclusively on nuclear weapons for defense much in the same way the U.S. depended on the "nuclear umbrella" to defend Western Europe.

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